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Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all

Country profiles of formal and non-formal adult education opportunities in literacy, numeracy and other skills: England

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This paper reviews the history and development of adult literacy and numeracy work in England, in the context of formal and non-formal adult further education, the introduction of the Skills for Life Strategy and more recent developments; the current scale of need and the provision in place to meet it; the standards, curricula, assessment and monitoring arrangements in place; and concludes with outstanding challenges and recommendations to address them.

Literacy and numeracy in England

Background and development

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland comprises four countries (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), has a population of 64 million (2013), of whom more than 80 percent live in England, and covers an area of 243,000 square kilometres. It has a GDP of $41,000 per capita, with high levels of income inequality – with the income of the richest 10 percent being almost ten times as large as the poorest 10 percent. 73.7 percent of 16-64s are in work, 5.3 percent (1,750,000) unemployed, and seeking or available for work, and 22 percent not in the labour force. 81 percent of jobs are in the services sector (with particularly strong financial services), 9 percent in manufacturing, 8 percent in construction, and one percent in each of agriculture and energy and water. The UK is a member of the European Union and currently has a Conservative government.

Responsibility for education is devolved to the component national administrations of the United Kingdom. This report focuses on literacy and numeracy in England, and in addition makes reference to ICT and English for Speakers of Other Languages, which have at different times been recognised as basic education skills.

England has long recognised that a significant proportion of the adult population lacked the literacy and numeracy skills needed for full participation in an information rich industrialised society. Early recognition of the scale of the challenge came with the two World Wars, when large numbers of conscripts needed instruction in literacy and numeracy in order to perform effectively. From 1920 the Army recognised that 'education was an integral part of Army training', including teaching 'the three Rs _ reading, writing, and (a)rithmetic - to Other Ranks (Kelly, 306; Broad 123).

However, despite the visionary 1919 report that confirmed the role of universities and voluntary bodies in educating adults, and instigated provision of broadly based non-formal adult education after World War 1 (Ministry of Reconstruction), and despite a comparable development of and commitment to adult education following 1945, there was little attempt in England (or elsewhere in the UK) to address the literacy and numeracy needs of adults, beyond minimal remedial education courses, and a modest continuing programme in the Army, until the early 1970s.

Then, the long established voluntary sector British Association of Settlements co-ordinated a national campaign, 'A Right to Read' to highlight the scale of literacy needs; and the BBC mounted a prime time series, incorporating sketches, a fictional narrative focused on a literacy learner, interviews with real students and information on getting help (British Association of Settlements, Hargreaves). These initiatives triggered government action. A national agency was established with a remit to train volunteer tutors, to publish materials, and to strengthen pedagogy. Local authority provision expanded dramatically as, at first, literacy and, later, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages classes were established as a core element in adult education programmes. In addition, the national basic skills development agency, created in 1975, was maintained in different forms until 2006. Teaching was initially mainly 1:1, using volunteers, but small group teaching rapidly took over. A strong feature of the 1970s' campaigns was their critical pedagogy, drawing on learners' experience, and there was a focus on generating and publishing student writing – linking literacy publications to a wider working class educational publishing movement. (Mace, Hamilton).

Following the adoption of National Targets for Education and Training and of a National Curriculum for schools in the late 1980s, and as a result of the passage of the Education and Training Act in 1992, funding for 'nationally significant' (broadly qualifications bearing) non-formal adult education was removed from local authorities and administered through a national funding agency. Literacy, numeracy, and English for Speakers of Other languages provision was supported by this new Further Education Funding Council.

Skills for Life

However, following the 1996 OECD IALS study, an inquiry chaired by Sir Claus (later Lord) Moser, *A Fresh Start* highlighted that up to seven million adults (one in five of the adult population) in England had difficulties with literacy and numeracy – a higher proportion than in any other European country in the OECD study apart from Poland and Ireland. (OECD, 2000, DfEE 1999) The cross-government Moser Report prompted government action and in 2001 the Skills for Life Strategy was launched (DfEE 2001). It aimed to improve the literacy, numeracy and, unlike Moser, English for Speakers of

Other Language skills (Skills in information and communications technology was added as a basic skill in the mid 2000s). A target was set of 2.25 million adult learners to secure a qualification by 2010, with interim targets of 750,000 by 2004 and 1.5 million by 2007. National standards were established, with skill levels from absolute beginners to school leaver certificate level (with 5 levels - see appendices) – which then served as the definitions of literacy and numeracy; national curricula and tests were developed, major research was commissioned backed by a budget of £2,500,000 a year for six years, and minimum teacher qualification standards were set, recognising literacy and numeracy as discrete specialisms.

The Strategy's aim was to 'make sure that England has one of the best adult literacy and numeracy rates in the world' (DfEE 2001). As the 2013 OECD Skills Outlook (PIAAC) report made clear (see below), this ambition was not achieved, nevertheless the participation and achievement targets established in 2001 were more than met, with 5,700,000 adults taking courses, and 2,800,000 achieving nationally recognised qualifications.(OECD 2013).

The *Skills for Life strategy*, to which government committed £7 billion over eight years, emphasised the needs of priority groups at risk of exclusion, including unemployed people and benefit claimants; prisoners and those supervised in the community; public sector employees; low-skilled people in employment, and younger adult learners aged 16–19. However, during the life of the Strategy, changes to funding limited ESOL provision (which fell from 560,000 in 2005 to just 139,000 in 2013/14), focused increasingly on learners with the shortest journeys to formal certification and labour market entry (NIACE 2006, SFA).

One final feature of the strategy was its commitment to motivation and promotion, through prime time television advertising (its Gremlins campaign was effective if controversial), and in mobilising wide ranges of partners to encourage take up of provision.

The Skills for Life strategy was developed during a period of substantial expansion of non-formal and formal education opportunities for adults. However, policy shifted from 2003, with almost annual Government Skills policy papers making clear that public funding should be targeted on qualifications based studies designed to secure employability for labour market entrants and qualifications for the existing workforce. Significant funding was shifted from college based studies to employer led *Train to Gain* programmes, which led to significant deadweight, as employers displaced their own training

budgets with public money, and many adults had existing skills confirmed through box-ticking exercises. Despite powerful evidence that the impact of literacy programmes on people's lives was greatest for those below entry level 2, (Parsons and Bynner, Howard), the re-focusing of Government policy onto skills and employability was accelerated with the publication of the *Treasury Leitch report* (Leitch). Overall participation by adults in publicly funded learning fell by a million between 2003-2007, as a result of the changing priorities. It fell by a further 1,300,000 between 2010 and 2015, as funding for further education was reduced by 24%, and was targeted more and more narrowly on 16 to 19s, and on easily measured utilitarian provision. (Nash and Tuckett, SFA).

The decade long focus on literacy and maths gave way in 2012 to a re-definition of the work. Functional Skills, initially designed as part of a holistic approach to the educational needs of 14-19 year olds, are 'the essential skills needed for English, maths and ICT, vital for young people to participate in life, learning and work', and are essential, compulsory elements in two main qualification routes for 14-24s - apprenticeship training, and a Foundation Learning Tier - as well as being stand-alone qualifications in their own right. This new formulation swept up learners needing literacy and numeracy, students with learning difficulties and/or other disabilities, and all who had achieved less than a grade C at GCSE (ISCED level 2A), and public provision was to be called English and Maths. The changes came as public funding for further education was reducing: whilst school budgets for children up to 16 were protected, and whilst universities saw a 26% increase in budgets between 2010-2015, FE was cut 24% over the same period.

The current scale of need

In 2013 the OECD published the results of its international comparative survey of adult skills in literacy, numeracy and information processing (PIAAC). It reported on results from England and Northern Ireland, and was followed by a research report from the Department of Business Innovation and Skills in England, which analysed results in England. They showed that 17 percent of adults between the ages of 16 and 64 had low skills in literacy, 24 percent in numeracy, and 18 percent in information processing (OECD 2013, BIS 2013).

The literacy results for England marked a significant improvement on its 2006 IALS result, placing it mid-way on the table of responding countries' average level of skill, but despite the investment in Skills for Life the numeracy results were weaker than in the earlier study. In addition, the report highlighted two significant features of basic skills performance in England. First, alone among the

OECD countries sampled, 16-24s in England demonstrated no greater skills than 55-64s, whilst 16-18s had lower scores than the older cohort – presenting serious challenges for the labour market, where minimum skills' requirements are rising across a wide range of employment sectors. Second, the report showed that the gap between adults with high and low levels of skill in literacy, numeracy and information sharing was bigger and more marked than in other countries.

The PIAAC results were broadly in line with the findings of two Skills for Life national population surveys in England undertaken by government in 2003 and 2012, except that the Skills for Life surveys did not show significant reductions in the percentage of adults with low literacy skills (DFES 2003, DBIS 2012).

Current provision

Whilst the main bulk of provision is offered through further education colleges and adult education services, there is also significant on-line provision offered through *learndirect,* (initially established by government in 1997 as the University for Industry), and through workplaces as well as through third sector providers**.**

These streams of provision each report to the Skills Funding Council, which reports on participation and achievement in English and Maths.

The Skills Funding Agency reported that in 2013/4:

951,800 adults (19 plus) participated in English and Maths provision; reducing to 905, 600 in 2014/15. Of these:

707,500 participated in English (down 7.6% on 2012/13) and reduced further to668, 600 in 2014/15;

669,900 participated in Maths (a fall of 10.7% on 2012/13), and fell again to 623,900 in 2014/15;

139,200 participated in ESOL classes (a fall of 4.8% on 2012/13); and fell to 131,100 in 2014/15.

Within these totals there was significant provision in the Army, and of people in offender institutions, where the incidence of low basic skills for adults was high.

In addition, a further 42,000 learners were engaged in family English, mathematics and ESOL classes funded through the ring-fenced community education budget (SFA 2015).

Whilst the bulk of provision goes through colleges and adult services, a great breadth of agencies was involved from the beginning of Skills for Life. As its strategy document made clear, there was a clear intention to include, alongside government departments: employers, trade unions, national training organisations, the Small Business Service, the Connexions Service (guidance and advice), Employment Service programmes, and Social Services. Sunderland Football Club opened a basic skills centre for fans beneath the stadium; libraries and museums hosted clubs; firms like First Bus made literacy and numeracy provision a priority for staff, and published First Book, written by workers who had been through the firm's literacy programme (though it was unusual since Ananiadou et al found that few employers persist in provision when public funding ends) (Ananiadou et al).

One major public sector initiative is worth highlighting. Between 2001 and 2005, the Government established a National Health Service University (NHSU) with a remit as a corporate university to support NHS modernisation by unlocking the potential of a 'million hardworking, talented people', and to provide practical learning for everyone at every level: staff, patients, carers, and volunteers. Of the 1,200,000 NHS staff, 200,000 lacked any qualifications, and it was estimated that there were 50,000 with literacy and numeracy needs. This was recognised as of key importance to staff needing skills in interpreting ratios and quantities in preparing cleaning fluids or patients' medicines. The Skills for Life programme was central to the initiative (Braddell).

Trade unions have had an important role to play in making and supporting provision. As part of Government's expansion of adult learning opportunities in the late 1990s, the trade union movement was supported in developing learning representatives alongside shop stewards, charged with representing workers' learning needs in dealings with employers, and in acting as peer group mentors, advisers, and brokers in helping workers gain access to appropriate provision. There are now 30,000 learning reps and they have played a key role in supporting staff seeking to strengthen literacy and numeracy at work, as well as undertaking a wide range of other initiatives.

Voluntary organisations have been active and innovative partners in making provision, and volunteers have been active in statutory provision, too. For example, recognising that many customers struggle with filling in forms, the advice service onemanchester introduced literacy beacons in 2012, to find informal tutors/mentors to support customers' literacy programmes

There have been key developments in embedding literacy and numeracy in vocational studies (Eldred 2005), and in inter-generational learning – where family literacy has resulted in striking improvements for child and adult alike (Brooks et al), initiatives targeting homeless adults, literacy in drug rehabilitation units, and in offender institutions.

It is important to note that other literacies – (health literacy, education for citizenship, and for sustainability) have been addressed outside the basic skills agenda, and since public funding of basic skills has been conditional on the pursuit of national priorities, whether offered by formal institutions or by community based adult education, it is all accounted for under formal education (with the exception of family literacy, as mentioned above). However, much of the most creative provision, linking formal basic skills to wider rights based agendas has been developed in non-formal educational settings.

Standards, curricula, assessment, and monitoring

As part of Skills for Life, new national literacy, numeracy and ESOL core curricula for adults have been introduced, based on national standards at each of five levels [Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1, Level 2], as well as assessments, both diagnostic and summative, through a National Test. The standards were developed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, published in draft in 2007, widely consulted on, and adopted from 2010. Comparable standards were developed for Information and Communications Technology, in response to the findings of the Treasury's Leitch Report on world class skills, which highlighted the importance to employers of strengthening labour market entrants' ICT skills alongside literacy and numeracy. The standards are attached in the Appendix, and continue to shape the assessment, and curricula of English, Maths and ICT basic skills. (QCA et al, 2007)

The literacy skills assessed at each level cover reading, writing, listening and speaking, and for each there is a detailed specification. To take reading in detail, for example, the Entry Level 1 requirement covers reading and understanding 'short texts with repeated language patterns on familiar topics, and reading to obtain information covers common signs and symbols. At Entry Level 2 students can 'read and understand short straightforward texts on familiar topics' and can read and obtain information from short documents, familiar sources and signs and symbols.' At Entry Level 3 adults can 'read and understand short straightforward texts on familiar subjects accurately and independently', and can read and obtain information from everyday sources.' At Level 1 adults can 'read and understand straightforward texts of varying length on a variety of topics accurately and independently', and can read and obtain information 'from different sources.' Finally at Level 2 (ISCED 2A), adults can read

and understand ‘a range of texts of varying complexity, accurately and independently’, and can read and obtain information ‘of varying length and detail from different sources’.

Similar detailed elaboration of the skills needed at the different levels is highlighted for speaking and listening, and for writing, and can be seen in the Appendix to this document. Whilst there was widespread welcome for the clarity of the work in establishing such national literacy standards, a significant number of practitioners and academics argued that the technical focus of the national standards failed to recognise the rich variety of context that literacies are used in – and that competence is needed across a range of those contexts. Literacy practitioners also argued that the technical focus also underplayed the importance of literacy as a critical practice – reading the world rather than just the word, as Freire argued (Barton et al 1998, 2000, Crowther et al, Freire).

The numeracy standards elaborated the skills needed at each of the five levels under three skills sets – understanding and using mathematical information, calculating and manipulating mathematical information, and interpreting results and communicating mathematical information. Once again, the full list is in the Appendix, but for example in understanding and using mathematical information at Entry Level 1 adults can ‘read and understand information given by numbers and symbols in simple graphical, numerical or written material’, and can specify and describe ‘ a practical problem using numbers and measures’. At Level 2, adults can ‘read and understand mathematical information used for different purposes and independently select and compare relevant information from a variety of graphical, numerical or written material’, and can specify and describe ‘ a practical activity, problem or task using mathematical information and language to increase understanding, and select appropriate methods for carrying through a substantial activity’.

Comparable standards covering ICT are included in the Appendix (QCA).

To complement the identification of national standards, the Skills for Life strategy included the requirement for teachers to be qualified to level 4 (graduate level) in literacy and/or numeracy, and was followed by the introduction of compulsory CPD and a commitment to securing a qualified and regulated workforce. However, the subsequent closure of the professional body for teaching in further and higher education, and the ending of the requirement to be qualified or to undertake continuing professional development has had a negative impact on strengthening the capacity of teachers in other disciplines to support basic skills. Early in the life of the Strategy, a major research programme on teachers in literacy and numeracy was commissioned from the National research and development

Centre at the Institute of Education (Cara et al). Significant shortages in qualified mathematics teachers have regularly had an impact on provision.

Formal assessment of Functional Skills English and Maths is undertaken through national tests administered by independent awarding bodies, which are a distinctive and long-standing feature of the English education system. Among them the City and Guilds of London Institute and EdExcel, a division of Pearson's have a wide international as well as national reach, but a range of awarding bodies offer curricula to address these standards, and the tests to assess their achievement. The effectiveness of a focus on summative testing has been the subject of debate, with a vigorous argument made for a focus on formative assessment (Lavender et al).

A distinctive feature of ESOL provision is the additional Home Office 'Life in the UK' test, where accompanying preparatory curriculum for ESOL learners who want to become British citizens was developed by the Department working with the National institute of Adult Continuing Education (Castelino). Concerns arising from the 2005 London bombings, and more recent evidence of radicalisation of some Moslem youth in particular have also led to initiatives in inter-faith understanding and a Government 'Prevent' programme to contest radicalisation, which have each had an impact on ESOL work.

The quality of provision is monitored through the work of the Office of Standards in Education (OfSted), through a programme of inspections of the full range of providers of further education, and through periodic thematic good practice studies, where for example OfSted highlight Interserve PLC's success in organising basic and key skills training for a dispersed workforce, and McDonald's Restaurants Ltd. in improving employees skills in mathematics and English online. A cross phase from early years to adult learning in 2011 highlighted the value of teaching phonics, even to adults. Institutional inspections happen on a four to six year cycle, with under-performing areas re-inspected more rapidly, and findings are published (OfSted).

A further form of scrutiny on basic skills provision is offered by the substantial academic research undertaken on literacy, numeracy and ESOL, and by a dedicated practitioner community, co-ordinating their work through intermediary bodies. Notable among them are the National Research and Development Centre for literacy and numeracy at the Institute for Education (now part of University College London); the Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics; the South Bank

University London Language and Literacy Unit; NIACE (which hosted independent inquiries into literacy, numeracy, ESOL and family learning over the last decade), the Education and Training Foundation, RAPAL, the literacy practitioner research network, and through NATECLA the ESOL practitioner organisation. There is, too, National Numeracy – a campaign established to mobilise adults and young people to improve numeracy, and drawing on evidence that poor numeracy is strongly associated with poverty and weak engagement with the labour market.

Challenges and recommendations

The key challenge facing England is in reaching, engaging and making effective provision for the continuing substantial proportion of the population with poor literacy and numeracy skills.

As current participation numbers make clear this will not happen at a time when the further education sector is experiencing continuing major reductions in funding, without a renewed publicly funded campaign.

The national strategy has shifted over its life from a focus on the most marginalised, with the weakest skills to a focus on those with the shortest journey to qualifications valued by the labour market. In a country where the gap between affluence and poverty is wide and widening, those with least skills need to be prioritised.

The evidence is that poor numeracy is even more associated with poverty, poor employment chances, and poor health than weak literacy, yet provision in England has been overwhelmingly more effective in developing engagement strategies and innovative provision in literacy. There is a need for a focused numeracy campaign involving the mass media.

Embedding basic skills in vocational and humanities studies proves effective, but the challenge of securing teachers across the post-school curriculum, who are able and confident to support literacy and numeracy improvement is key to its widespread success.

Family and inter-generational literacy benefits children and adults alike, and needs to be a priority.

The national standards developed to date measure technical skills. The challenge is to find ways of developing, assessing and celebrating literacies in all their diversity – to achieve this will involve a culture change, in which educators and students are trusted to develop effective provision, rather than complying with centrally set targets.

The experience of NIACE in conducting national representative sample surveys over 20 years, suggests that in designing appropriate survey measures UNESCO may wish to complement an adapted version of the PIAAC survey with questions that ask people's own perceptions of their confidence and competence in using literacy and numeracy (on a 5 point scale) in for example dealing with official documents, buying a car, estimating a budget, agreeing a loan.

The perennial challenge of helping politicians and policy makers to recognise the benefits of improved basic skills for health, civic engagement, tolerance, reduced recidivism, and most importantly to recognise that education is a human right, as well as a route to the labour market.

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Addendum

There are a wide range of courses in education for sustainability, ranging from non-formal education classes offered for example by the Workers' Educational Association, or by the environmental charities Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, or the Eden project, to academic courses on Sustainability Literacy (for example at the University of Gloucestershire or Manchester Metropolitan University), and publications like Aaron Stibbe's *'The handbook of sustainability literacy'* (2009), Totnes: Green Books.

There is also a long-standing concern with education for active and global citizenship in the UK. The Government supported Community Learning Champions initiative (http://www.communitylearningchampions.org.uk/), the short course programme of Northern College, and the work of local adult education services over decades has been supplemented by specific concerns with preventing the spread of extremist anti-democratic opinion, and colleges have developed Prevent programmes to address the issue.

A significant number of international development charities have headquarters in the UK, and contribute to education for global citizenship – among them Save the Children, ActionAid (with its very effective REFLECT programme, which makes creative use of Freirean principles), Christian Aid and Oxfam – and the Universities of East Anglia and Sussex both have widely recognised centres of excellence in sharing best practice in the field.